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# Making Sacrifices for the Game; a Case Study of Pre-Elite Athletes

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A Dissertation submitted in Partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Sport and Recreation Management (Honours)

At Lincoln University by: Gabrielle Thomas

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Lincoln University

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## **Abstract**

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## **Abstract**

As young people chase high performance and professional sports player titles, there are many factors which make or break young athletes including what these young people are willing to endure and sacrifice for their dream. This research aimed to examine the sacrifices pre-elite athletes make in order to obtain a high performance or professional sporting career. For the purpose of this research, sacrifice was defined as the giving up of something valued for the sake of other considerations. Seven pre-elite athletes from the Canterbury region who are involved in the high performance programme Pathway to Podium (P2P) participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews on their experiences with sacrifices and external influences in their sporting fields throughout their pre-elite career. For each athlete, what they sacrificed and what they considered a sacrifice differed, however there were many consistent themes across all athletes involved. Results indicated that athletes experienced a significant decrease of leisure time resulting in many social sacrifices, with all seven participants commenting on the lack of time for social activities among both friends and family. Instead, many described their social connections to be completely within their sport. The athletes revealed feeling expectations from coaches, families and by other external stakeholders, though it was linked to their own internal expectations of themselves. The interviewees described altering their non-sporting life trajectory and future plans for their sporting commitments and therefore experienced sacrifices in the form of financial, educational and career advancements. Further sacrifices included participation in other sports, relocating for sport, injuries and time.

**Key words: Sacrifices, pre-elite, high performance sport, Pathway 2 Podium**

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## Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
List of Figures .....	5
Chapter one .....	6
Introduction .....	6
Chapter Two.....	8
Literature Review .....	8
Over conformity to sport by athletes .....	9
Sport and Religion.....	11
Psychology/emotional state of athletes .....	12
Age Group .....	13
Literature conclusion .....	13
Chapter Three .....	14
Methodology.....	14
Athlete recruitment .....	14
Table 1.....	15
Data Analysis.....	16
Chapter Four .....	18
Results and Discussion .....	18
Sacrifices .....	18
Social Life .....	18
Family support .....	20
Expectations.....	22
Life Trajectory .....	25
Finance and Education .....	26
Other sports .....	29
Relocating .....	30
Goals vs. Injuries .....	31
Positive deviance .....	32
Silver lining/positives .....	32
Chapter Five .....	35
Conclusion.....	35
Chapter Six .....	37
Reference List .....	37

## List of Figures

Figure One: The Athlete Data Spread

15

## Chapter one

### Introduction

Many New Zealand children grow up dreaming of becoming the next Irene Van Dyke or Richie McCaw. However, only a very small number of athletes, if they are given the right opportunities and make enough sacrifices, will reach their dream (Bennis & Nanus, 2017). Growing up with a sporting dream is never easy; there are school sports teams to make, regional and representative squads, right up to high performance selection. But along the way there are many factors which make or break young athletes, including what these young people are willing to endure and sacrifice for their dream.

This research aims to examine the sacrifices pre-elite athletes make in order to obtain a high performance or professional sporting career. For the purpose of this research, sacrifice is defined as the giving up of something valued for the sake of other considerations (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008). For each person, what they will sacrifice and what they will consider a sacrifice will differ, as the idea of sacrifices is personal and cannot be replicated.

New Zealand's High Performance athletes only receive significant funding once they have succeeded on the world stage level and are then classified as elite (Zealand, 2017). High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) classifies this through a system called carding athletes. Carding is a way of identifying which athletes are eligible for performance support. HPSNZ and national sport organisations jointly consider and agree cases for carding status and these targeted athletes receive campaign investment from HPSNZ (High Performance Sport New Zealand, 2017). However this support is explained by HPSNZ to only support athletes tracking towards podium finishes at Olympic Games, gold medals at Paralympic Games, and podium finishes for non-Olympic sports (Zealand, 2017). This study is concerned with the level prior to this, on pre-elite athletes who do not yet receive funding from Sport New Zealand and are not yet eligible to be carded.

It seems to be a reoccurring theme amongst athletes to invest time in training and holistically altering their life to a high performance sporting one in order to best prepare for a future as a successful athlete (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008). Unfortunately these decisions often fall when young athletes are at pivotal times in their lives between secondary and tertiary education (majority of Pathway to Podiums athletes range from 19-21 years of age). This often means sport can alter one's life course, what sports they are able to play, what career they decide to pursue and their relationships with those closest to them, explained as transitional challenges into elite sport (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008).

Following the introduction, chapter two commences with a literature review examining the sacrifices athletes make for sport and the implications of these in current studies available. These include over conformity and positive deviance to sport which can result in over training consequences including burn-out, injury, eating disorders and psychological impacts on athletes. This literature review also considers how elite athletes are developed in order to understand the rigorous training regime these athletes are subject to in order to understand the sacrifices they make.

Chapter three outlines the methods and processes undertaken to gather information and data. This describes how interviewees were selected and why, including ethical concerns around anonymity of the athletes involved. A qualitative approach was employed and this section will identify further in depth as to how.

Chapter four focuses on the results and discussions comprising of key themes and emerging findings of this research. Specifically this chapter identifies athlete's experiences and personal sacrifices for sport and how this has impacted their life. It further describes the challenges they face as a pre-elite athletes, what they sacrifice for their sport and how external influences (personal including family, friends and coaches) and sporting organisations play a part in these sacrifices.

Chapter five concludes the dissertation revealing the importance and relevance of identifying the sacrifices pre-elite athletes make and offering recommendations for sporting organisations to better support their athletes through this phase of athlete development. Finally recommendations for further research into the next steps towards better athlete development and retention in terms of sacrifices are suggested.



## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

When trying to understand the sacrifices made by athletes, it is helpful to know how to develop an elite athlete. Understanding the development and long-term sustainability of an elite sporting career has become a worldwide pursuit as international sporting success is of increasing importance to many nations (Larkin, Huxley, & O'Connor, 2017). Understanding the major influences and contributions to their development can help us to analyse what they give up to pursue an extraordinary lifestyle. A new study this year examining Olympic and world champion track and field athletes in Australia used questionnaires to gather information from these athletes. The results included: "some of key influencing factors during athlete development included later specialisation (involvement of other sports during adolescence), strong social support, growing up in a major city and completing a university degree" (Larkin, Huxley, & O'Connor, 2017, p. 12). In this article, Larkin et al. (2017) narrows down the lifestyles and characteristics of most athletes who make it to the top, showing us that there is a typical road these people follow. Freedom of choice is almost taken away, as many are encouraged to forgo social opportunities and often even family commitments in order to be better prepared for the court or the field. This can also be seen as they are encouraged to study while competing an example of this is the sports scholarships offered by institutions to keep athletes in the educational system. This can then make life a juggling act and for many not a choice but an obligation to then attend a tertiary institution for sport.

The expectation that athletes forgo social opportunities is perhaps surprising given that sports psychologists have found that social factors significantly impacted sporting participation. Smoll (1992) found that a range of social relationships have an impact on participation in sport. The study, which examined junior baseball teams, reveals "that children who evaluated their coaches, team mates and the sport of baseball more positively had much higher levels of participation for the next season" (Smoll, 1992, p. 112), whilst those who did not had significantly higher levels of dropout rates (withdrawing from the competition). Smoll reiterated that success of the team had nothing to do with returning players and dropout rates, it was solely to do with their positive affiliation with the sport and those involved. A similar finding was also recorded in the work of Losier (2008) looking at motivations of athletes. Losier (2008) found that social factors are the biggest motivators for athletes and one factor among the subgroup of social factors is the coach's behaviours towards athletes (Losier, 2008). Along with positive athlete-coach relationships, social control within sport, burnout/overtraining/fatigue, fear of failure and emotional/mental toughness all affect participation rates and 'dropouts' in athletes across a range of sports.

Coakley (1992) specifically looks at burnout among athletes, examining whether it is a personal failure or a social problem. This study, unlike many in this topic which examine adult athletes, focused on adolescent athletes and identified among participants “that the root cause of burnouts is grounded in the social organisation of high performance sport; these roots are tied to identity and control issues” (Coakley, 1992, p. 271). These social issues in the sporting organisations are also known as ‘sporting politics’ and can be described as bias within the organisation, for example coaches ‘favouritism’. In order to prevent burnout among our young athletes, Coakley (1992) recommends changing the social organisation of high performance sport, the way that sport is experienced and integrated into the lives of young athletes and the structure and dynamics of relationships between athletes and those significant others in their journey (coaches, team mates, support staff etc.) (Coakley, 1992). This statement is referring to being more aware of the athletes as a whole, of their total hauroa (wellbeing) and not just their performance as an athlete. In order to succeed and prosper a life outside of sport is essential such as family, work and friends and this is an area of athlete management that has only recently been focused on by high performance sport. Kellmann (2010) reiterates the danger of burnouts but his research was predominantly physiological and focused on the idea that “effective recovery from intense training loads often faced by elite athletes can often determine sporting success or failure” (Kellmann, 2010, p. 95). He concludes with stating fatigue in both physiological and psychological ways are dangerous and threatening to athletes. This reflects how harmful it is to push an athlete past their physical and psychological fatigue point, which can be experienced during over conformity or sacrificing too much of themselves and their life outside of sport. Kellmann states it can be threatening to athletes to push them too far, perhaps Kellmann has uncovered a question in relation to sacrifice, does too much sacrifice decrease performance just as too much training can?

### Over conformity to sport by athletes

Robert Hughes and Jay Coakley coined the term the ‘sporting ethic’ which emphasises sacrifice for the game, seeking distinction (over achievement), taking risks and challenging limits (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Some athletes that ‘over conform’ to these ethics and this is where athletes can become vulnerable to corruption, amongst other behaviours. Although this ethic is set to highlight positive norms as it sets apart ‘real athletes’: those that will make sacrifices for the game and conform (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). It also presents a unique problem of social control within sport which is seen in many high performance sporting environments as sport dictates athlete’s social life outside of training or competing hours.

Another term for over conformity is positive deviance. Ewald (1985) states that positive deviance becomes deviant when pursued with an intensity and extensity going beyond conventional bounds (Ewald, 1985). Furthermore Coakley goes on to state “deviance occurs when actions, traits, or ideas

fall outside the boundaries that mark the normal range of acceptance in a social world...The power and performance model of sport stresses a sport ethic of doing “whatever it takes” to win” (Coakley, 2004). Uncritical acceptance of this model may lead to various health-compromising behaviours (Krane, 2012) . For example, many female and male athletes have fallen victim to eating disorders in their quest for a professional sporting career. This shows that athletes, if engaging in positive deviance, will not stop at anything in the pursuit of success in sport. They will defy all boundaries and do whatever it takes, including sacrificing their own health. Coakley gives another example to elaborate “an example of positive deviance in sports would be continuing to train even when it causes or intensifies pain and injury, disrupts family life, jeopardises health and safety, or involves the ceaseless pursuit of unrealistic and futile sport dreams” (Coakley, 2014).

Another characteristic of positive deviance is that athletes can blindly obey and follow their authoritative figures throughout their quest for success without considering their mental and physical health first. Michael Burke wrote a confronting and explicit article on the abuse that athletes can be subject to when working under the authority figures of coaches. He focused on the sexual abuse of female athletes. In recent years, child sex abuse in sports has made headlines worldwide (Burke, 2012). Burke conducted a Canadian research of roughly two hundred and sixty then, current and retired Canadian Olympic competitors and revealed twenty two percent of these athletes had experienced sexual encounters with authority figures (Burke, 2012). This has also occurred in Australia with two high profile coaches publically accused of sexually abusing young female athletes. The Minister of Sport and Recreation at the time explained the problem that child sexual abuse poses for sport: “sport has escaped formal scrutiny because we still believe it builds character and represents good things. We often forget the relationship between the coach and the athlete can lead to various forms of manipulation” (Burke, 2012). This can only exacerbate positive deviance and the sacrifices these athletes make if their coaches who are trusted by athletes are encouraging this behaviour. Coaches have an effect on athletes directly and their choices and decisions within sport. In high performance sport coaches can even have an effect on what athletes do outside of training hours. Coaches can be responsible for encouraging their athletes to make sacrifices. (Krane, 2012). This becomes increasingly concerning as during this phase of adolescence is for many, where they start to form their identity. “Participant stories suggest that interactions with peers in sport assist female adolescent athletes in developing their psychological (including emotional and intellectual), social, and physical selves” (MacPherson, 2016, p. 73). Not only are these young athletes impressionable and forming their identity but Coakley (2017) reveals that characteristics of over conforming athletes are those with little self-esteem and those seeking social approval/acceptance (Coakley, 2017).

Ewald's study on positive deviance highlighted three key reasons why athletes engage in positive deviance including experience, sensation and enjoyment (Ewald, 1985). Ewald (1985) argues the feeling of sensation and enjoyment may cause athletes to be addicted to the adrenaline and feelings felt while competing or training. The dreams, goals and aspirations an athlete might possess can take over their whole world preventing them from seeing the bigger picture beyond sport. Training and competing can be stimulating for the body and mind. For example, exercise makes us feel better due to it releasing endorphins in our brains. As well as physical benefits sport for many young people enhances their sense of self, their social life and sense of accomplishment and success. Many young high performance athletes already identify themselves with being an athlete due to the enhanced sensation and enjoyment they get from sport. The experience encompasses all facets wrapped into one: the culture, the social element it brings, the enjoyment the athlete experiences and both the training and competing phases of being an athlete. The experience of this lifestyle for many becomes who they are and what they do and those who engage in positive deviance are predominately high performance athletes as positive deviance is normalised in this environment (Coakley, 2014). But positive deviance in sport is simply disguised as dedication and commitment. When athletes are clouded by positive deviance they can struggle to see what is normal and what is not. This is where the idea of sacrifices for sport can become dangerous, as athletes can begin to sacrifice core areas outside of sport including life away from sport, family and their own health. Athletes in high performance sports come to believe that without their athlete-peers, their training and competition there would be no identity as an athlete, no battle-forged bonds with their peers, and none of the joy and excitement that comes with living on the edge and pushing the limits of their bodies in ways that separate them from 'normal' people (Coakley, 2014), being an athlete defines them as a person in their entirety. Sacrifices occur in the extraordinary context of high performance sports where survival, acceptance, and identity reaffirmation as an athlete is required.

### Sport and Religion

A book called 'If Christ came to the Olympics' also studies the over conformity in sport and challenges us with an analogy between sport and religion. Baker exclaims "ones ultimate concern is ones religion and sport is perhaps the most dominant of all false gods in which people invest" (Baker, 2000, p. 45). The main relationship between both sport and religion is that as religion teaches people to devote their lives to Christ and sacrifice a 'normal life', so too does sport. Brian Reich, an American researcher, undertook a study of American baseball and religion "all of which included valuable analysis of the shared language and imagery between baseball and religion" (Reich, 2001, p. 61). Reich, through defining religion in sports, found "among the characteristics common to both religion and sports are ideas and images related to deity, faithful followers, and most importantly, belief" (Reich, 2001, p. 61).

Another quote Reich used to describe the relationship between sport and religion is “Sports are religious in the sense that they are organised institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul” (Reich, 2001, p. 63). This shows the relationship is internal and intrinsic, in essence it’s what we believe, what drives us and what our heart is desiring, for many athletes in place of god and religion, is sport and winning. There are two main components that reinforce this relationship between religion and sport. Firstly the idea that “Sport has gods, the star and superstar athletes who have great influence and charisma over the masses of fans” (Reich, 2001, p. 62). Secondly sport has its symbols of faith including trophies, shields, titles held, championships won or the game balls similar to that of the bible (Reich, 2001).

### Psychology/emotional state of athletes

The world of sport can be an unforgiving one. You have to have resilience as failure is imminent and no one’s career is linear. Disappointment can come in many different forms such as not being selected for a team/squad or trial or even injury. Mental toughness is crucial for both physiological reason and psychological as athletes push themselves both mentally and physically to their limits. Many studies published in sport, exercise and health journals such as Kellmann’s study on over training (Kellmann, 2010) have examined the physical exhaustion and limits of athletes but not nearly as much on the mental/emotional exhaustion athlete’s face. These challenges can be equally as detrimental to young athletes as the physical side of training and competing as Burke (2012) explains. Both psychological and physiological aspects of an athlete’s life will determine their wellbeing.

A study examining ultra-marathon runners in 2016 states “intense physical and psychological fatigue; sport in which the role of mental toughness can be crucial” (Jaeschke, 2016, p. 242). Jaeschke (2016) focused on interviews with ultra-marathon runners and allowed researchers to gain an insight into the mental processes runners experience as well as the challenges and demands they face. Themes included perseverance/overcoming adversity, life experience, psychological skills and perhaps most importantly, an understanding of the limitations and ethical concerns these athletes experience. Injury can be physical, but can also be psychological. These themes show how tough it is to make it in the world of professional sport and reinforces the need for research as to why our young people endure these and sacrifice for sport. Jaeschke (2016) states that fear of failure can have adverse effects on many aspects of young people’s lives and can be linked to stress and burnout preventing athletes reaching their potential in sport. Anticipation of a threatening outcome can elicit fear and fear is known to hinder performance. Sport is a popular and significant achievement domain for children and adolescence and there is lack of research on fear of failure in sport among this age group (Saga, 2007). Saga examined children ages 14-17 and identified the main perceived consequences of failure were “diminished perception of self, no sense of achievement and emotional cost of failure” (Saga, 2007,

p. 1171). Finally, Lazarus (2000) reveals that emotions do play a role in influencing performance in competitive sports. If sport is responsible for eliciting these emotions of fear and anxiety in young athletes, and we know the experience of these emotions hinder performance, then it would follow that we could produce higher achieving athletes by minimizing and helping these young athletes instead of pushing them.

### Age Group

A significant amount of the existing sport research in social science is focused largely on the adult population and those who are already professional athletes. As noted by Saga (2007) and Messner and Muto (2014), there is a lack of research examining children and adolescents in sport. There is a significant issue with the topic of sport and sacrifice, because sacrifices do not start when you make your goal (for example, are selected for a professional sports team). Sacrifices to become and live as an athlete arise much younger in youth, when you are learning the sport and developing the talent that you have. Stress and burn out have been looked at younger levels (Coakley, 1992) but not the sacrifices that these young people make.

### Literature conclusion

The literature demonstrates evidence and awareness of athletes making sacrifices, mainly through the concepts of over conformity or positive deviance. However, these studies primarily analysed sacrifices in terms of health, not in terms of giving up a social life, study, work opportunities or other “social” sacrifices. Further, these studies have mainly focused on adult elite athletes rather than younger athletes. Looking further at the idea of sacrifice will hopefully enable the sporting systems to focus on athlete’s wellbeing in order to positively affect performance and life-long outcomes. It is possible that we could keep more junior athletes in the high performance systems for longer by understanding other aspects of their life and the idea of sacrifice in sport. This will also increase the level of competitiveness and success for our provincial teams by being able to keep more of our young talent in these systems and pathways of high performance sport for longer, achieving more. Through understanding why these players play and what drives them, what they are willing to sacrifice for their goal/dream our sporting systems can be better equipped to appeal/cater to them.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative research methods comprising of semi-structured interviews with seven pre-elite athletes. A qualitative approach was adopted because as Merriam and Tisdale (2016) argue, qualitative research examines meaning and purpose, the purpose this research was to identify the meaning of sport to athletes. All participants were recipients and members of Sport New Zealand's funded programme: Pathway to Podium (P2P). P2P was used as a way to ensure that athletes were recruited who were defined as pre-elite, given that the study is focused on the sacrifices made by pre-elite athletes. P2P comprises of male and female athletes from a range of sports who excel in their area and whom Sport New Zealand deem to have a successful future in New Zealand sport.

### Athlete recruitment

P2P is a programme designed especially for pre-elite athletes in order to better prepare future New Zealand players for future athletic success. Their mission statement is 'A Better Prepared Athlete' (Sport NZ, 2017). Pathway to Podium is a nationwide talent development programme designed to help emerging athletes (usually in their late teens) and coaches prepare for the demands of a life in high performance sport (SportNewZealand, 2017). This programme includes all sports and athletes including netball, football, and track and field to name a few. There are fourteen regions nationwide with the P2P programme totalling 350 pre-elite athletes and 150 coaches from throughout New Zealand being selected to participate each year (SportNewZealand, 2017). P2P athletes are selected nationwide by their respective sports' provincial and New Zealand selectors as athletes with the potential for future success. P2P offers its athletes workshops, strength and conditioning, medical support, athlete life and mental skills support as well as further opportunities.

There are currently 43 athletes in Canterbury's P2P programme between the ages of fifteen and twenty one with the majority falling between eighteen and nineteen years old. P2P in Canterbury is led by Andrew Ellis, a Canterbury and New Zealand cricket player with a firm understanding of professional sports. Upon commencing this research a meeting was held with myself, my supervisor and Andrew Ellis where Andrew agreed to assist in the recruitment phase of this research by offering his knowledge about athletes in the 2017 pool. Andrew recommended interviewing ten athletes of the 43 enrolled who he believed would be a good representative sample of the Canterbury P2P population. The sampling of these subjects is described as a choice of naturalistic inquiry (Patton, 1997). This method focuses on capturing programs processes, documenting variation and exploring the important difference between participant's experiences and outcomes (Patton, 1997). This is why

a range of genders, sports and development age of pre-elite athletes were chosen to participate in order to be reflective of the different stories they each have to share and what sacrifices have meant for them.

The interviews consisted of two sections, the first began with an oral history approach which inquired into the athletes sporting experiences and current status. The second section, based on a thematic approach, included probing information relating to lifestyle, relationships, training schedules and most importantly sacrifices in high-performance sport (Kerr, Barker-Ruchti, & Cervin, 2016). The interviewees were asked to describe situations and instances where they believed they had made a sacrifice and the circumstances around which each occurred. Interviews took place at New Zealand's High Performance Sporting facility based at Jellie Park Recreation Centre in Christchurch. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour. Each interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed for data analysis, all data remained in a password protected device.

The demographics of the sample of athletes are outlined in table 1.

Table 1.

<b>Athlete</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Stage of Sport</b>	<b>Level of Pathway to Podium</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Age</b>
1	Male	Hockey	New Zealand U21's	1 <sup>st</sup> year P2P	3 <sup>rd</sup> year University	21
2	Female	Netball	Junior ANZ team (Beko National League)	2 <sup>nd</sup> year P2P	3 <sup>rd</sup> year University	21
3	Female	Hockey	Black-sticks train on (2 Caps) NZ U21's	2 <sup>nd</sup> year P2P	1 <sup>st</sup> year out of school	20
4	Female	Javelin Thrower	New Zealand Secondary school	1 <sup>st</sup> year P2P	Year 13 at school	18
5	Female	Football	New Zealand U20's	1 <sup>st</sup> year P2P	Year 13 at school	18



6	Male	Running- long distance runner	New Zealand Athletics Team	1 <sup>st</sup> year P2P	1 <sup>st</sup> year out of school	19
7	Female	Rowing	NZ U21'S, RPC (regional performance crew)	2 <sup>nd</sup> year P2P	2 <sup>nd</sup> year University	20

As described in Table 1, the gender split between males and females was 5 females and 2 males. Out of the ten athletes originally contacted to participate in the research, three athletes did not respond and all three non-respondents were male. Within the sports there are 2 individual, 4 team sports and rowing which could arguably be either. Hockey is the only sport represented twice within the data. All athletes were between the ages of 18-21, with five athletes in education (two at high school and three at university). The remaining two athletes were first year outside of school. The P2P Programme has a two year retention where athletes graduate from year 1 to 2. The sample comprised of four first year athletes and three second year athletes.

### Data Analysis

The data collected from my in-depth open-ended interviews consist of direct quotations from interviewees about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge. As Basit (2010) describes, coding is one of the significant steps taken during analysis to organise and make sense of textual data. Baxter and Jack (2008) reveal five techniques for analysis of which three were used within this research: pattern matching, linking data to research questions and explanation building which kept the coding process systematic. Coding included familiarisation of the data, time reflecting on and reordering the data. I began by highlighting the data when interviewees touched on information directly concerned with the research questions. I was then able to extract the key themes which was done through recognising key patterns across all texts. After all key information was highlighted and segregated I was able to code manually by hand on the transcript to build concrete evidence and explanations of themes, which was the 'explanation building' phase described by Baxter and Jack (2008). One key useful method I used throughout coding and analysing the data was to adopt a method used by Becker (1998) known as the 'Bernie Becker trick' in data analysis. Becker created the idea that the best way to enlarge the reach of a concept is to forget the name entirely and concentrate

on the kind of collective activity or meaning taking place (Becker, 1998). This means using concepts or generalised statements about whole classes of phenomena rather than specific statements and apply to people and organisations everywhere rather than just to these people here and now, or there (Becker, 1998). This idea is what steered my research, the idea that what these athletes are facing could be applied to many athletes around the world.

In line with the requirements of the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee, who approved the project, all the data was anonymised with each interviewee allocated a number. The information provided to participants, and the interview questions, are included in the Appendices.

## Chapter Four

### Results and Discussion

This section analyses the results from seven interviews with pre-elite athletes. These results included analysing themes of sacrifices and how a variety of pre-elite athletes experience making sacrifices for their sport and how sporting organisations do or do not prepare and support athletes throughout their transition into a high performance lifestyle. These results reveal what it means to attain a high performance career and how external influences play a role in these athletes making sacrifices for their sport. I will address the elements of sacrifices including social aspects, expectations and pressures, life trajectory alterations due to sport, financial hardship, career advancement delay and relocating for sport.

#### Sacrifices

##### Social Life

All participants revealed they had both social networks inside and outside of sport, however, they described how the majority of their social networks were in high performance sport. These social connections were often formed through rigorous training together and forming a bond at competitions and the high performance lifestyle, as Interviewee One and Interviewee Three expressed:

*It's the same with socialising like rowing and trainings does take away from that aspect, im not left with much time so yeah sport takes away from everything else in your life when you're in high performance sport at that elite level there is less time for literally everything else in your life*

*We spend all that time together and they're my best friends. I get to hang out with them when we are training full time together, inside sport it's super close-knit 'cause you understand everything ,what one another is going through, we have fun with each other but then we also compete against each other too. I feel like it's more accepting 'because we are chasing the same goals and struggling with the same stuff, we all get it.*

*I've got my boyfriend who's in the New Zealand futsal side of things. We met through football. He was my coach so he understands the stresses and commitment 'because friends don't really get it and what it's like. They can go party every weekend but I can't, I've got games and training whereas my boyfriend and my parents get it.*

As Interviewee Three emphasises, there is a tendency for athletes to stick with a close-knit social group, with those who have a knowledge or understanding of high performance sport. This can be explained by Larkin et. Als 2017 study which revealed athletes freedom of choice is almost taken away,

as many are encouraged to forgo social opportunities and often even family commitments in order to be better prepared for the court or the field. Interviewee one explains how important these supportive people can be:

*Being in Christchurch away from mum and dad and not having a massive support network makes it really hard especially when training isn't going that well and you feel like you aren't making improvements, that can get pretty tough, it's hard not to have those special people here to help you get through it.*

The expectation that athletes forgo social opportunities is perhaps surprising given that sports psychologists have found that social factors significantly impacted sporting participation. Smoll (1992) found that a range of social relationships have an impact on participation in sport. These are linked to in sport context which perhaps is why many interviewees deem time spent training to be their only socialising time as many reveal stronger friendships within sport. Smoll's study reiterates this idea as positive social experiences within sport increases participation in sport. Losier's (2008) study also revealed social factors are the biggest motivators for athletes, showing how important athlete's social wellbeing and networks are to their success and perseverance in sport.

Many participants revealed they believed their interpersonal relationships and social life would be the major benefiting area if they were to not have sporting commitments take up most of their time. Social sacrifices were an integral finding of this research with all seven participants commenting on the lack of time for social activities while being in high performance sport. This is also why many pre-elite athletes find themselves with co-athlete friends and social circles as like Interview One, they intertwine their socialising with sport due to the lack of time for anything else. Positive deviance/over conformity to sport as discussed by Coakley goes on to state "deviance occurs when actions, traits, or ideas fall outside the boundaries that mark the normal range of acceptance in a social world" (Coakley, 2004). For many athletes such as these within the age range of 18-21 years old social lives are crucial, participants identified seeing most of their peers being involved in parties, boys and alcohol. Therefore this behaviour is deemed as the social norm in which pre-elite athletes do not conform to, enhancing the idea that athletes social lives sit outside of social norms.

Interviewee two explained how his social circle had narrowed because all his friends had gone to Otago University for study and he did not have time to go see them or talk to them: *"It's just training, some work and family. It just kind of happened I slowly spent less time with my mates and more time running and being an athlete"*. These high performance athletes tend to have a close-knit group of friends and social networks as their support personnel due to the lack of social activity they believe they are able to contribute outside of their sport. Interviewee Three reflected on moments at school

where she felt excluded for missing social activities and events and describes “*people just stop asking now because they assume I just can’t make it*”. She reflected on inside jokes and memories that her friends make without her that she is not a part of, she admits, “*yeah it impacts on our relationships and I miss important dates like birthdays*”. Balancing a social life outside of sport has proved challenging as many participants of this research revealed feeling like an ‘outsider’ in many groups away from sport and ‘missing a lot’. In line with over-commitment to the sport ethic, due to the demands as an athlete all participants described their social life as ‘different from a non-athlete’.

Some athletes really embraced and accepted the more isolated and private journey of the venture as an athlete, however some deemed it to be an area they wanted to improve interviewee four commented on the fact she believes the social balance in her life needs to improve and it was a work-on for her. Interviewee Four identified this as an area she plans to work on much like her physical training:

*It’s definitely an area I need to work on and really improve; is that social aspect and making sure I’m engaging with more than just athletes, in this high performance environment. It’s really hard because people just don’t understand and I personally feel being in this environment I’ve had to mature a lot quicker to be able to cope with the pressure so in that sense I’m not relatable to many girls my age, their all concerned with parties or boys and that really has no appeal to me anymore.*

Perhaps the balancing act of a social life outside of high performance sport is one that is gained with experience and knowledge and master later on. Many pre-elite athletes struggle due to having to leave their peers behind at very social stages of life.

### Family support

A number of interviewees discussed the importance of their family as providing them significant support. This support was made up of several forms, with the most important to the athletes being the unquestioned emotional support that varied immensely from the pressure they received from coaches or within the sports. Several interviewees described this form of support:

*My parents are really understanding, I get quite tired and they understand so they don’t really pressure me or have expectations of me, they know I set my own.(Interviewee Five)*

*I think it’s always been my choice- they just back me with whatever decision I make (Interviewee Three)*

*No matter what I do as long as I am happy with it (Interviewee Two)*

*My parents want me to go far in football if I love it and they love that I can travel and represent my country but at the end of the day they care about me not just my football so if its stressing me out or changing me that's more important to them than how I perform or how far I go (interviewee three)*

These findings contrast with the stereotype “pushy parent” figure described by authors such as Ryan (1995). Booth, Butler, Hedge, & Cunliffe (2014) conducted a similar research which focused on the effects of parent’s behaviour on young athletes. Their research strongly suggests that parents play the largest role in influencing the healthy development of their own children in sport (Booth, Butler, Hedge, & Cunliffe, 2014), furthermore, they acknowledge that parents can play an instrumental part in a young performer’s success. Perhaps this research defies many current literature on the need for ‘pushy parents’ in sport as all participants of this study identify their parents to have a more understanding and fully supportive role.

Interviewee Two described the very complex relationship he has with his parents who, far from being pushy, instead do not share his understanding of what training entails:

*They (parents) don't want me to overdo it. When I was talking to dad this morning and he was like 'what are you doing today?' and I said 'going for a run then going to the gym and then going swimming then I'm running again', he was like 'you're training too much' and I'm not! Like yeah, too bad, they always just think I over train but they don't, dare I say it, know what hard work looks like' cause they have never have run like I do. It's a lot different. They'll always say 'I think you should have a day off or not go for this run'. What they say doesn't affect me or make me change my mind, I take on board what they say, but I'm still going to go train, everything based around what I think, but their opinion does matter when it comes down to it.*

As Interviewee Three’s account shows, parental influence can weigh heavily on athletes choices. In contrast to Interviewee Three, Interviewee Four, an athletics javelin thrower, described coming from a family who had a heavy athletics involvement

*I had family that had been heavily involved in athletics so I had grown up in that environment but not necessarily been involved in it myself, so I think I was twelve or thirteen when I took up athletics as a sport more than just a fun thing to do with the family*

All of interviewees Four, Five and Six were brought up in families who competed in their respective sports of athletics, netball and hockey, while Interviewee seven had had two older sibling compete in the sport prior to their participation, this altered and enhanced their involvement showing family influence.

It seems across all interviewees that they had a very close and personal relationship with their parents and/or families. Many athletes described family being their second or equal priority to sport. This is arguably due to the amount of time many athletes spend with their families when their friends are on social outings which high performance athletes are not able to attend due to the fact they often contain alcohol and long nights out. Consequently, many young athletes spend more time with their families than people their age. *"I'd say due to my position it means I spend a lot more time at home and with my family than most people my age"* (interviewee five). This close connection might also be explained by how reliant athletes are on their families, they often have to sacrifice careers and a steady income due to training times which often means that athletes rely significantly on their parents for financial support to fund competition and travel for their sport. This financial strain on athletes due to non-working lifestyle often forces them to stay at home with their families. As Interviews Four and Five mentioned, they could not afford to live away from home, with Interviewee One similarly stating she often has to ask her family to help her with living costs while living away from home.

### Expectations

In high performance sport, due to the immense time commitment to sport and the programme offered by Sport New Zealand there is a certain level of expectation that P2P athletes must meet in terms of performance and focus during trainings and competitions. Following on from the theme of socialising discussed about, athletes described being encouraged to minimise their socialising.

Interviewee Six stated:

*My coach in a way makes me feel guilty if I go out or do anything outside of netball, he wants us to be athletes twenty four seven which is both hard and unrealistic as a young person and more so as a uni student.*

Even during periods where socialising may be acceptable or allowed many athletes still felt pressure to not be engaging in any social activity. This is an example of the sport ethic at work and in this particular example the coach is teaching the athlete the sporting ethic, to over conform beyond social norms for sport by telling them they should sacrifice everything for sport. This reiterates Bourkes 2012 work where we suggests those authoritative figures can manipulate athletes based on their position. However pressure may stem from team mates, parents and even themselves also. Expectations are often thrust upon these pre elite athletes and often it can be the external influences and impressions people have that can pressure athletes into pursuing and staying in sport. Phrases which were reoccurring included the words 'you sort of know what is expected of you', 'the expectation is that you want to be there to represent New Zealand and be the best'. One participant had recently been removed from her high performance environment due to non-selection and she described

“friends-wise I miss it but maybe not with the pressure element, everyone else just sees the good stuff like ‘oh you do so well’ and no one sees the hard side and the struggle” (Interviewee One). These expectations and pressures can come from both internal and external influences and can often dictate how athletes spend their time both inside and outside of their sporting commitments. Interviewee one described how coaches impact on how she spends her time away from rowing:

*We are expected to not drink or party and to not sit in the sun that kind of thing because it drains your energy. So your coaches would be mad if you turned up after being at the beach all day because you’ve trained all morning and you need to let your body recover and not be dehydrating yourself in the sun so you can train again and put your best efforts out. Everything in high performance sport is all about rowing and if you do anything slightly irresponsible then someone’s going to have something to say about it.*

Interviewee Five adds; “we have expectations to keep fit, eat healthy, recover well and get good enough sleeps each night”.

These comments are consistent with previous literature that has identified athletes as receiving pressure to sacrifice every aspect of their lives for sport (Coakley, 2004). In particular, previous literature has singled out the role of the coach in creating these expectations. Literature that can offer insight into these effects of coaching and the demands of coaches on athletes includes the work of Jenny McMahon. McMahon witnessed and lived through both positive and negative impacts that coaches can have on athletes in the short term and also in the long term through their athletes-coach social interactions and practices (McMahon, 2012). Potrac, Robyn & Armour (2002) applied Erving Goffman’s work to applied sports coaching in regard to everyday power relations occurring in a real contexts. They discovered that coaching practice is influenced by a perceived need for coaches to establish a strong social bond between themselves and the athletes; a bond founded on the athletes respect for professional knowledge and personal manner (Potrac, Robyn, & Armour, 2002). Interviewee Two touched on the bond with his coach and expectations he receives from his coach in stating:

*He thinks I’m better than everybody else... If I don’t win he’s looking for a reason why, being beaten by another athlete means I have done something wrong. Not because they’re simply better than me, he’ll look for any reason like did I over train, was I sick, he’ll always try to find the answer and that’s the way he accepts a loss. So it’s on me if I lose, not the fact sometimes better are just better than me.*



Interviewee Two extended upon the theme of expectations by talking about his University in the USA and the expectations on its coaches, explaining:

*Their jobs are on the line that we do well. It's not just a small salary to them, it's their job. My school is ranked top 5 in the world for long distance running and if they started to drop outside of that it would be terrible, they would lose their jobs and that's all down to how we run. They can't run for us.*

Although many influences/pressures/expectations in sport come from external stakeholders, interviewees described that their biggest pressures are elicited from within. For example, Interview Two described:

*I think I probably have the most expectations of myself out of anyone... My expectations of myself stem from my success as an athlete, once you get success the expectations get higher. I guess it's the same with all sports, like it's an expectation that the All Blacks win every game because they are so successful.*

This perhaps can explain why there is expectations and pressures on these athletes as it is drawn from success and in some way crucial to attain success and creates accountability for athletes. At the same time, Interviewee Two also discussed how the expectations he placed on himself were heavily influenced by his need to succeed in order to secure his future. In the context of training in the US College system, he explained:

*To be fair they will only support me coming back to New Zealand if I'm good, if I get results while being overseas and perform. Otherwise if I don't, New Zealand athletics won't have anything to do with me. If I'm not at Commonwealth or World Championships standards then they won't care, whereas those who go to the Olympics have come back well supported and welcomed back by Athletics New Zealand so it really is about success, results, winning.*

Due to this scenario, Interviewee Two described how if he did not succeed during his university years ahead, he would “*pack it up, get a job and start a normal life*”. Michael Sam analysed Sport New Zealand's policies and New Zealand's government involvement in sport. Sam (2003) identified excellence as the government's foremost idea. Sam (2003) goes on to state that these ideas matter in public policy as their meanings are continually translated into future plans and actions (Sam, 2003). Therefore if the government is focused on excellence so then will the sporting organisations, requiring athletes to excel in order to remain within the program adding pressure to athletes.

This depicts how much pressure is on these athletes to perform and how much they give up to pursue their passion and make it a lifestyle and living. Using the word “normal” refers to the fact these

athletes identify themselves to be different to everybody else who does not have to sacrifice their time, money, social life, living situation and much more. These are examples over athletes engaging in positive deviance and over conformity to the sporting ethic.

### Life Trajectory

A fundamental finding of this research included that many athletes altered their non-sporting life trajectory and future plans for their sporting commitments. This mainly affected pre-elite athletes transitioning out of secondary education pursuing tertiary education opportunities. Interviewee One explained she originally wanted to study engineering but since talking it through a member the New Zealand Rowing U23 team they explained they could no longer pursue engineering alongside rowing therefore Interviewee One opted to study sports coaching in order to be more flexible around rowing commitments, including regattas and trainings. This is a reoccurring theme with pre- elite athletes as often these athletes are facing a pivotal time in their lives, the age group between 17-23 years of age is when most young people are completing tertiary study and starting to consider a potential career.

Interviewee Two confessed to rationally accepting the fact he would be in Otago with his social group outside of athletics living “*the classic student life*” if he was not committed to his sport. He opened up further explaining:

*If I go back to year nine when I was messing around before I found sport I may even be in jail. I don't know, hopefully not jail but, yeah, I would not be focused or have any goals, I would just be having a good time like most people my age.*

However instead Interviewee Two has been offered a University scholarship to the United States at one of the top running schools in the country. He has been working and training leading up to him commencing his studies and sporting scholarship in 2018.

Interviewee Three was pressed with a similar decision as Interviewee Two with an offer to move to Auckland for football as well as university for tertiary study. She believed that if she was serious and passionate about football she would need to make the move to the centralised zone of Auckland for better access to facilities and coaching however her reluctance stems from describing herself as a “home body”:

*My coach wants me to move up to Auckland now but I can't because my life is here and I want to study here and also I can live at home for free whereas Auckland is really expensive, and I don't have anyone there I'd just be there for football and sometimes that gets a lot and it's nice to come home to your family. He's said if I want to go further and commit after u20's I'm going to need to move to Auckland.*

Again, the coach features as a major influencer in placing expectations on this athlete. Finally Interviewee Six reflected upon a decision she made two years ago for sport and her future:

*I quite honestly don't know if I would be at Lincoln doing this degree if it wasn't for netball and getting that netball scholarship to Lincoln. My mum was the one who encouraged me to apply even though I didn't want to. I wanted to travel first year out of school. When I received the scholarship I then had to choose what I wanted to study, I changed my mind three times so I definitely know I wouldn't have been forced into that decision if it wasn't for netball. I wanted to do landscape architecture that's what I signed up for but so many people said I wouldn't be able to get through it with netball, so I would have pursued that if it wasn't for netball.*

Sport can alter ones plans and therefore outcome which is imperative to understand for athletes that these decisions now will alter the outcome after sport, especially if relocating for sport occurs. Participants do view moving away as a sacrifice as Interviewee Four revealed what she has 'given up' for sport;

*I was planning on going to Auckland university to study law and commerce because it's the best for it in the country but I knew the athletics coaches up in Auckland weren't the ones I would have enjoyed, I really love my coaches and my squad down here and the people I am with so I have decided to stay here which means I can stay at home too and keep training where I love it.*

Study choices form a problem for these young athletes as they are at risk of coming out of the high performance system being undereducated in other fields. Many scholarships offered to athletes at tertiary levels do attract them as they can balance study with a sports scholarship such as interviewee two, six and seven. However often athletes aren't fully able to commit to gaining high academic grades due to their timing constraints which many other students don't face. This also reduces the amount of work experience, reduces the quality of their curriculum vitae and potentially the chance at gaining employment post-sporting career. Thus adding to financial strain and difficulty making a shift into the working industry.

#### Finance and Education

Across all participants and sports, it emerged that players are not funded within their sport apart from for tournaments in some sport, which simply covers travel costs for teams/athletes. Interviewee two explained:

*You need funding by high performance or Athletics New Zealand 'cause we train too often to have jobs and because we don't get much funding or get paid as pre-elite. We can train half as*

*much 'because we need a job for money, you reach a certain point and you need to start making a living, you just can't doing that being an amateur athlete, it's a vicious cycle.*

For many athletes the fear of not having a plan B outside of sport poses a threat as they abandon all effort of building a career outside of the sporting career they are working to build. This can become problematic when injury, non-selection or post-athletic career occurs. Some athletes however have perspective on a sport/life balance such as interviewee four by explaining *"I don't want to put all my eggs in one basket"* and *"sometimes you just get so obsessed with the sport but there's so much more to it"*, however many others remain focused on their sporting goals no matter the financial hardship.

Interviewee one goes on to explain finances in her sport as she explained;

*there's never any financial incentives, never get paid for anything its more me putting money in and paying my way for rowing, definitely nothing back*

Interviewee one commented on often needing to rely on her parents for living costs due to rowing expenses and lack of working income. This has been researched by Wylleman & Reints (2010) who identified several former elite athletes whom due to lack of financial stability turned to their family-of-origin for support, or even returned home to live with their parents (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). This shows the financial strain athletes put on themselves to chase their dream and how they are willing to sacrifice an income, even living costs. This is also deemed as over conformity as it is placing them at financial risk for the sake of sport.

Interviewee One described moments during her pre-elite career where she felt sport conflicted with other priorities. These included making money, as she explained:

*Rowing has made making money really difficult and obviously having money and making money for living in general is really important and that has to take priority at some point or else what are you going to do? Not being able to work and get money puts a strain on everyone else around me also.*

These types of financial pressures can also fall onto parents and families of respective athletes as many of them are still living at home in between school and university. Due to the fact many athletes simply do not have the time to secure a job the costs inevitably fall onto their parents, as Interviewee Three explains:

*Camps are all your own pocket sort of thing so my parents fund me for all the camps pre, during and after tournaments, whether it's age groups, representative stuff or New Zealand/World Cup*

*because all camps are in Auckland because football is super centralised. There's nothing here in Christchurch for us we have to travel and that cost is on us, well our families and parents.*

These interviewee's experiences are similar and link to the work by De Bosscher et al (2006) who provides a model for elite success. One of the key factors she identifies is the necessity of financial support for athletes. The findings here suggest this is even more crucial when dealing with pre-elite athletes as often these athletes are students in the education system. Financial support is said to be in the top factors influences sporting success, this can come in funding, grants, sponsorships or resources.

These sacrifices for education and careers can come in many forms, the most common among my participants and arguably this age group is giving up time for sport. Camps, tournaments and training each day. Interviewee Three mentioned she had missed a month of school over the duration of the World Cup and that each camp before tournaments and World Cups included a week or two off school just for preparation. Neglecting their education for sport has also included some athletes skipping or dropping courses in order to better time manage and cope with their sport. Both Interviewee Six and Four referred to dropping a courses for sport to enable them to complete both adequately and explained this had set them back in relation to their peers and completing their degree/school graduation. Interviewees explained:

*My last exam is the day before I leave to compete at Nationals so it's been hard to organise, especially because it's up in Hastings not an easy place to get to, so I want to hopefully sit my exam up at a school in Hastings so I don't have to stress about missing my flight or anything like that. (Interviewee Four)*

*I can't work because of training, I can't get a job that flexible which means I can't work full-time, this makes living really hard over the summer when uni is finished and everyone's off working full time but I have to train full time and therefore I have no money. Training finishes at 8:30am out at the Waimakariri River and then gym/weights that afternoon again and no one wants anyone who can only work 10-2pm. We also have regattas over the weekends so I can't work and I feel bad because I still have to pay rent so I have to ask my family for help. It's so hard to get jobs my weekends are gone with the little work I can get in the café my weekends are gone but I need the money over hanging out with anyone. (Interviewee One)*

*I'm going away for three and a half weeks for hockey in September and I get back just before an exam so it's going to be a tough few months trying to study and keep on top of things. (Interviewee Five)*

*In terms of uni, a paper I need to take in order to finish my degree, I put on hold because of netball because they said I wouldn't manage even though I probably would have. That has probably set me back a year behind at uni so I might have to be a fifth year student so that's tricky and I really regret that now. (Interviewee Six)*

Athletes often put sports before many other areas in their lives, as Interviews Six disclosed: *"it's definitely university on the side to sport"*. This coincides with Cosh & Tully (2013) research which was conducted on athletes undertaking tertiary education alongside their sporting careers with their primary academic goal to 'just pass'. Their results indicated athletes are prioritising sport and in doing so athletes have sacrificed academic success (Cosh & Tully, 2013). The athletes/interviewees of this research as well as Cosh and Tully's constructed time management as a barrier to successful integration of sport and education therefore often allowed poor educational results to be explained by sporting priorities.

#### Other sports

*There is a point you reach when you have to have a conversation with yourself, it's like what am I doing and I wasn't looking like I was going go much further so it was hard to make that decision but once I did it was obviously the right one for me zero regrets, I enjoy running which I was never allowed to do so im excited to exercise when I want to (interviewee one).*

Interview two originally got into high performance sport through cricket, which is where he describes he became open to the possibly an idea of having a high performance sporting career, little did he know it would be in a totally new sport. Interviewee two describes having to give up ski racing and cricket as he struggled with time management when running became *"a part time job"*. This became similar to interviewee three who recalls being selected to travel to the gold coast for touch rugby the same time she was selected to travel for the New Zealand secondary schools football team, she chose football and had to give up playing touch altogether, she opens up stating *"I always think now what would have happened if I had of gone to touch"*. Interviewee five reveals *"in high performance sport we train all year round so there is no way to compete in another sport"*.

Interviewee three mentioned as a head of sport at her secondary school she was unable to compete in sport for her school. Due to the competition level, extra trainings and risk of injury she was unable to take the field and represent her school like her fellow students she describes this as being huge for her to give up. She alludes to the fact that this does take the enjoyment factor out of football as all games are then serious and competitive. Interviewee three along with other participants reveal due to the time constraints and risks playing sport for 'sports sake' and enjoyment is now out of the question and must be sacrifices for high performance sport.

## Relocating

Throughout the interview process another theme which emerged was the idea that many athletes and their families had relocated for sport or future opportunities in their sport. Interviewee One explained how she had moved up to Christchurch from further down south after graduating high school to join the RPC (rowing provincial centre):

*I moved for rowing, so my last exam was on the Thursday and then by that Friday I moved to Christchurch for RPC, we have to be here for RPC cause I'm zoned for southern and that means training in Christchurch full time.*

In perhaps the most dramatic relocation, Interviewee Two is relocating overseas for long distance running on a varsity scholarship commencing 2018 with a value of close to five hundred thousand dollars. Similarly Interviewee Three described:

*I needed to be in a better football environment so I'm now at (Club name) and that's when I made the move to club away from school and I've just been there. It was too hard coming in for trainings and school, six trips a day so my family chose to move into town.*

Centralised sports pose a unique issue for many athletes and sporting organisations. Interview Three plays football which it is very much centralised. It is similar to rowing where all camps and competitions occur in one single location as opposed to cities or regions nationally. This means for many athletes pursuing a career in high performance sport, relocating to the area of their centralised sport is integral to their development. Interviewee Three how challenging it is not being located in Auckland:

*We find when we go to the World Cup or the Olympics we can't quite compete, 'cause we don't get to train how we are going to play over there. With the female competition here, we can't get to where we want to. All the trainings are all in Auckland though, games every weekend against the men's sides for better competition are up north too. They all train together four times a week and don't find anyone outside of Auckland to play weekend games so I've only managed to get to three games so far and another coming up this weekend. My parents fund me to go obviously 'cause I don't have time for a job or anything like that, so yeah its quite expensive and sets those of us not in Auckland back a bit.*

Literature reveals relocating for sport is linked to mental illnesses in athletes along with injury and stress (Gullivera, M.Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015). Gullivera ET. Al found that mental illnesses were more commonly found in athletes who had relocated for their sport. With almost half of the athletes in her research experiencing a symptom of a mental illness. This highlights

the importance of supporting these athletes through the transition of relocating for sport and the importance to provide adequate and often professional support throughout it. Not only is support essential, but the respect for athlete's decision to not move if they do not feel ready as this is a big step for these young athletes and even athletes within this study revealed they are not and might not ever be ready to do so.

### Goals vs. Injuries

Goals are a standout concept when it comes to pre-elite athletes, arguably all athletes, as these are what drive athletes to continue and pursue their sport. Goals becomes a particular challenge when adversity knocks athletes, such as in the case injury which is always a risk. Interviewee one described:

*Since being injured my goals have altered, previously I wanted to make the elite team. I wanted to follow the path way all the way but obviously that didn't work out so now I guess I don't really have any goals. I hope to represent New Zealand again I just don't know how likely it is anymore (Interviewee One).*

Barker-Ruchti et.al. (2016) discusses injuries to athletes at this stage of both age and competition can be assumed to be career ending. Injuries have been found to be a significant indicator of life stress (Kolt, 1996). Throughout this research many participants mentioned their lack of time and stress about finances and careers alongside sport. Kolt (1996) suggests these can increase chance of injury and career ending outcomes.

Confirming Barker-Ruchti's (2016) findings, the athletes in this study also came back from injury stronger and more determined as it gave them time to reflect on what they really wanted. For example, Interviewee Six explained: *"even with my injury I am focused and considering a career in high performance sport, if anything it had made me more focused and want to get back, it's motivated me to work really hard to get back to playing"*.

All interviewees revealed they have international sporting ambitions including Commonwealth Games, Olympic Games, a gold medal at the Olympic Games, World championships, Senior World Championships, Silver Ferns and Black Sticks. For example, Interviewee Four stated:

*At this point I'm aiming for Commonwealth Games as my big goal and then following on from that Paris Olympics 2024. Smaller immediate goals next year are World Juniors in Finland which would be an awesome experience.*

Participants revealed all high performance athletes are exposed to support staff including a life coach which assists athletes in creating a sporting career plan, setting goals and dates for when they want



to have achieved them by. This method keeps athletes focused and with a training purpose and intent, which Interviewee Four reveals was the biggest step up from amateur to pre-elite.

#### Positive deviance

Due to the focus many athletes perceive to have it can often blind them from what is healthy and unhealthy determination and drive. All athletes within this study were asked to describe what they would give up for their sport in an effort to gauge their commitment and sacrifice levels for their sport. Interviewee one describes *“I was going to have to miss my best friend’s wedding for nationals in 2018”*. When researching into this interviewee exclaims *“nationals is the only way you can get a trial, you have to get to nationals and perform to get anywhere in rowing so if I had of stopped there would be no point to any of the rowing and hours of training I did previously leading up to nationals if I just didn’t go”* (interviewee one). Interviewee one depicts positive deviance by explaining;

*“I was in Christchurch for rowing so at no point could I say im not going to row because I have to go and do something else because that’s not why im here and its anytime you say I can’t go to rowing because I have to go do something else it’s just taking away from that goal that literally takes up all of your everything basically and you’ve given up so much in the process so why would you, previous to being dropped you could have thrown anything at me and I would have said no for rowing”*.

Interviewee two reiterates this by offering *“sports is number one, I should say my family but no it’s defiantly sport”*. Similar to that of interviewee three saying *“football is my highest priority”*.

#### Silver lining/positives

Although this research has focused on sacrifice, the athletes in the study also emphasised that there many rewards from being involved in high performance sport. Interviewee two reflected on moments during his childhood and education:

*I was kind of messing around and was a bit of a dick, I didn’t focus and I was getting into trouble at school a lot. I felt like other than cricket I was going nowhere in life. But when the idea of athletics came up I became a lot more focused, school became a way to get away from running so it gave me something to channel my energy towards outside of sport and I ended up getting better grades from it. I got the award for the biggest academic improvement at school not long after picking up running and athletics.*

For Interviewee Two, sport has provided an outlet and in return he has seen better engagement academically, changed his outlook on school and been motivated by athletics. This can be supplemented by Interviewee Four’s outlook on sport stating *“sport has been really good for my*

education, for balancing and achieving at school and getting scholarships for university". This was reinforced by Interviewee Three who stated:

*Playing sport has made me more organised so I do make sure I get all my school work done and my internals and homework done early in case I need to go away for football. I try do homework straight after school and Sundays, not being up late at night because I need my sleep so that I don't burn out.*

Although high performance sport reduces the amount of time people have to spend on career advancements and increases financial strain, Interviewee Four noted that she/he does not hold great interest in the financial side of sport: *"I'm not really drawn to the money. It's not a sport that pays particularly well and I'm okay with that and at peace with that. I'm doing it for the enjoyment factor and passion rather than for the money."*

Interviewee Four touched on the life lessons and learning she has been exposed to through being in high performance sport:

*It's more important for me to be a better person and learn those important skills to apply to everyday life in society than to go far in athletics. At the end of the day throwing far means nothing but being a better person by throwing far has a lot more meaning to it. I'm not the sort of person to sit around and do nothing, I need to be busy, have something I'm working towards and I'm a high achiever by nature so sport was naturally the best option to chase goals.*

Similarly, Interviewee Five commented on her high achieving personality:

*It's more of a lifestyle choice also. If I wasn't a high performance athlete I would be excelling in university and putting all my efforts there. I would remain fit as living a healthy life is important to me and it's who I am.*

These quotes suggest that there is a need for a certain personality to lead an elite lifestyle. It seems that this is often how these people by nature are and sacrifices are not only necessary but second nature to them as they sacrifice to live this lifestyle willingly by personality.

Interviewee Four offered a really open minded set of ideas and insights into the life of a pre-elite athlete with a positive spin on this lifestyle despite the sacrifice necessary for success:

*I have learnt so much on this journey and the skills that I'm learning to apply to my life that I feel like its teaching me more than a regular person would understand and I think it's really helpful with future endeavours and career options. Once you say you're an elite sports person (it)*

*immediately alludes that you're dedicated and hardworking, all those qualities people are looking for as high achieving you have to have in the sporting world.*

When initially learning all the sacrifices and the costs of being an athlete are known it can be hard to know why these athletes continue to pursue in the face of adversity. Interviewee Five explained how she questioned this herself:

*There have been so many times when I ask myself why I am I doing this to myself. When I finish training at 9:30 that night and have to be at a 6:30am gym session or when its pouring down with rain outside and training's not till 8pm and missing out on teams. These mental barriers can be so off putting but you do it for a reason. Mine is because I love hockey and when I think of why I love it, it makes it better. A team sport is also different because you have the support of your whole team members, that's why I love team sports.*

Interviewee Five's account shows that these athletes are not blindly following authority figures as Burke (2012) suggests can occur, but instead constantly reflecting and questioning the sacrifices they make for their sport and why they make them. Interviewee Seven adds, "*sport has made me who I am today and given me many great memories and friendships which I wouldn't trade for the world*".

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

This research has examined the sacrifices youth make in pursuit of an athletic career. Through undertaking semi-structured interviews with seven pre-elite athletes in the Canterbury region of New Zealand, I explored what, how and why pre-elite athletes sacrifice aspects of their life and sometimes wellbeing in the name of sport. The most significant findings include athletes sacrificing their social life, family relationships through relocating and time spent investing in their future career and education which ultimately impacts of their financial status. These athletes' experiences heightened pressures and expectations from external influences including coaches and sporting bodies such as their NSO or university. But athletes also placed personal expectations on themselves. The athletes in this study reported altering their life trajectory and future endeavours due to pursuing sport or relocating for sport. These pre-elite athletes are aware of the potential risk in high performance sport including injury, burn out and non-selection. Although these athletes are aware they are engaging in positive deviance and over-conformity for sport they are still passionate about pursuing sport, explained by the experience, sensation and enjoyment of competition and training (Ewald, 1985).

This study found that athletes need support and nurturing throughout their sporting career, many athletes fear losing everything if they were to get injured or not selected. Therefore clear high performance pathways and post-sporting career support needs to be in place, programs like Pathway to Podium where holistic athlete development is encouraged and targeted. Perhaps these programs could better support the psychological health of our athletes through more frequent appointments with mental skills and life coaches which are shared between carded athletes and pre-elite athletes at High Performance Sport New Zealand. This shared resources is often given priority to elite athletes over pre-elite making bookings difficult. Increasing the ease of access to mental skills and life coaches to assist athletes with their sport-life balance, decision-making and mental health inside and outside of sport would be valuable for these athletes, as many athletes stated they had changed their study/life plans due to sport.

Perhaps if High performance sporting organisations are made aware of these sacrifices including educational and financial sacrifices, they could better support their athletes and reduce injuries and burn out. Strategies may include increased funding for pre-elite athletes to reduce the strain and financial hardship burdening many of these athletes, especially with living costs, travel costs and competitions. This might also incorporate better resources and assistance for athletes in education whilst pursuing an athletic career such as secondary school audio recording of classes for those athletes

outside of class for sporting reasons. This may increase athlete retention and reduce drop off rates after secondary school.

This study was limited due to only accessing a small representation of the pre-elite athletes in New Zealand. A larger population selection would provide the opportunity to broaden the findings found here. Further research examining pre-elite development programs similar to P2P nationwide would be beneficial to ascertain the effects of different programmes. Likewise looking at how P2P is implemented in other parts of New Zealand to compare findings from Canterbury athletes to other regions would highlight the consistency of results.

Further recommendations from this research for sporting organisations to consider would include reducing set training times and allowing athletes to complete trainings when they can. Using a 'drop in' system at gyms rather than set training times would increase flexibility for young athletes to complete their education or work in conjunction with training seamlessly. Finally restricting training times to outside the hours of nine to five would also encourage education and work pursuits outside of sport.

Essentially this research has examined and proved that pre-elite athletes are sacrificing much of their lives in pursuit of a professional sporting career. In order to retain and better support these high performance athletes we need to first understand the sacrifice's they are making in order to reduce these and offer remedies. This may be a step towards developing a stronger, more competitive and sustainable New Zealand sporting system. Further research into Pathway to Podium would be beneficial into the long term future development of our pre-elite athletes.

## Chapter Six

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